

INTRODUCTION TO THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE FOR THE CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

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Overview

United States Attorney's Offices are the main litigating arms of the United States Department of Justice. There are 94 United States Attorney's Offices, one for each federal judicial district. Assistant United States Attorneys (AUSAs) working in these offices are trial lawyers for the United States, prosecuting federal crimes and representing the United States in civil litigation in the United States District Courts.

The Central District of California includes the seven counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura. With approximately 18 million residents, it is by far the most populous federal judicial district. The United States District Court for the Central District of California has approximately 23 active district judges, 10 senior district judges, and 19 magistrate judges. The District Court has three divisions. The Western Division, the largest, is in Los Angeles. The Southern Division, in Santa Ana (Orange County), has three district judges and two magistrate judges. The Eastern Division, in Riverside (Riverside County), has two judges and one magistrate judge.

The United States Attorney's Office for the Central District of California (USAO), with an authorized strength of approximately 250 Assistant United States Attorneys, is the second largest in the country (trailing only the District of Columbia Office, which, in addition to prosecuting federal crimes, also prosecutes all crimes committed within the District of Columbia, prosecutions that in other districts would be handled by local district attorneys). The USAO is divided into three litigating Divisions (Criminal, Civil, and Tax) and a non-lawyer Administrative Division. The USAO's main offices are in Los Angeles. The USAO also has a branch office in Santa Ana (Orange County) comprised of 22 Criminal Division attorneys who handle a full range of federal criminal cases originating in Orange County and three attorneys from the Civil Division. The USAO's newest branch office is in Riverside (Riverside County) and consists of 9 Criminal Division attorneys who handle federal criminal cases originating in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Criminal Division

Chief of the Criminal Division: Jacqueline Chooljian
Authorized number of attorneys: 188

The Criminal Division prosecutes federal criminal cases in the Central District of California. AUSAs in the Criminal Division advise federal law enforcement agents on criminal investigations, present criminal cases to the grand jury, try criminal cases before the United States District Court, and represent the United States in criminal appeals before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

The USAO's prosecution priorities are Anti-Terrorism, Gun Violence and Organized Violent Crime, Drug Trafficking, Corporate Fraud, Cybercrime, and Civil Rights.

As a result of the events of September 11, 2001, the United States Department of Justice, of which the USAO is a part, has refocused its efforts to prevent terrorist operations before they occur and to bring the perpetrators of those operations to justice. This is the first priority of both the Department of Justice and the USAO. The USA Patriot Act, passed shortly after 9-11, has provided investigators and prosecutors with new tools in the fight against terrorism. AUSAs in the Criminal Division work closely with agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other members of the Central District's four Joint Terrorism Task Forces to investigate and develop criminal cases against suspected terrorists.

The prosecution of federal offenses involving the use of firearms is also a priority. The primary vehicle for accomplishing this task is Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), which seeks to coordinate efforts by federal law enforcement, local law enforcement, and community groups to counter criminal gun use. As part of PSN, AUSAs in the Criminal Division work with agents from the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to develop criminal cases against the leaders of organized street gangs responsible for much of the Central District's gun violence. In these and other cases involving violent organized crime, AUSAs are often involved in long-term investigations that use undercover agents, wire-taps, surveillance, and other covert investigation tactics to develop racketeering (RICO) cases based on various violent offenses. Other targets of the USAO's efforts to reduce violent organized crime include Russian and Asian organized crime groups operating in the Central District and elsewhere. The USAO also prosecutes prison murders and assaults, bank robberies, and attacks on federal officers.

The USAO seeks to vigorously enforce federal laws relating to drug trafficking. The United States Attorney has established a multi-agency Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF), part of a program announced in October 1982 by the President and the Attorney General. Los Angeles also has been designated as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). A special HIDTA task force investigates and prosecutes narcotics cases in coordination with state and local agencies.

Vigorous and timely prosecution of corporate fraud, particularly that which would undermine the trust of the investing community, also is a priority of the USAO. Cases involving falsification of corporate financial information, self-dealing by corporate insiders, and obstruction of justice, perjury, witness tampering, or other obstructive behavior in connection with investigations of these crimes, receive significant scrutiny. Other areas of interest in the white-collar crime area include public corruption, health care fraud, defense contractor/ procurement fraud, and tax evasion. The USAO also prosecutes fraud and corruption in connection with government program activities, as well as environmental crimes, credit card fraud, and customs violations.

Cybercrime, including both cyber-based attacks on the nation's electronic infrastructure and economic crimes committed using computers, is also a USAO priority. The Central District of California is home both to a significant high-tech industry and to sensitive government computer installations. Protecting both is an office priority, with particular emphasis on investigating and prosecuting sophisticated attacks on computer systems, online auction frauds and intellectual property offenses .

Finally, the USAO seeks to uphold the civil rights of all Americans through enforcement of civil rights laws. Particular areas of emphasis include: hate crimes; human trafficking and involuntary servitude; and excessive uses of force by law enforcement officers.

AUSAs in the Criminal Division work closely with investigators from most federal agencies, including the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Postal Inspection Service, Secret Service, Customs Service, Securities and Exchange Commission, ATF, and the inspectors general from various other departments and agencies.

New attorneys in the Criminal Division are assigned immediately to the General Crimes Section, which is responsible for prosecution of the USAO's more routine criminal cases. Under close supervision by more senior AUSAs responsible for training, new AUSAs initially are assigned post-indictment felony cases, handling guilty pleas, suppression motions, jury trials, sentencings, appeals, and probation violations. The goal is for each new AUSA to handle a wide range of court proceedings and conduct several felony jury trials during his or her first year as an AUSA. After gaining this experience, AUSAs begin to also handle pre-indictment felony cases, remaining on call to advise and assist investigating agents by preparing arrest warrants, search warrants, complaints, and grand jury subpoenas, and by appearing before Magistrate Judges on initial appearances of arrested defendants, bail hearings, and related proceedings, and then conducting grand jury proceedings in the cases for which they are responsible. With the assistance of more senior AUSAs, each case that reaches the indictment stage is carefully screened to ensure that there is sufficient evidence and that the case warrants federal prosecution.

Upon completion of their tenure in the General Crimes Section, AUSAs become eligible for assignment to one of the senior sections. Assignments to the senior sections are based primarily upon the Office's staffing needs. The senior sections are: Terrorism and Organized Crime; Narcotics; Public Corruption and Government Fraud; Major Frauds; Computer Crimes; Environmental Crimes; Civil Rights; Asset Forfeiture; and Criminal Appeals.

AUSAs in the Terrorism and Organized Crime Section handle cases involving the most serious violent crimes including terrorist activities, arsons, prison murders and assaults, bombings, firearms offenses, and bank robberies. AUSAs in the section also handle cases involving crimes committed by organized crime groups, including traditional LCN (La Cosa Nostra) prosecutions, as well as prosecutions involving other emerging criminal organizations, including Russian and Asian organized crime cells. AUSAs in the section also supervise PSN, which, as described above, focuses on reducing gun violence. AUSAs in the section work closely with the Los Angeles Metropolitan Task Force on Violent Crime, comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, to investigate and prosecute members of large street gangs headquartered in Los Angeles that have expanded their often-violent criminal operations across the country. Additionally, AUSAs in the section helped to create and now coordinate the efforts of the Southern California Regional Sexual Assault and Exploitation Felony Enforcement Team (SAFE Team), a multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional task force dedicated to the investigation, apprehension, and prosecution of child sexual abuse, child prostitution, and child pornography, with an emphasis on sexual predators and distributors of child pornography on the Internet.

AUSAs in the Narcotics Section, which includes OCDETF and the HIDTA Task Force, specialize in developing cases against major drug traffickers for violations of federal drug, currency, tax, and racketeering statutes. AUSAs in this section work closely with investigators from the DEA, FBI, Customs Service, IRS, California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles Police Department, and other local law enforcement agencies. Major narcotics prosecutions, often involving multi-national drug cartels, are among the most important cases handled by the USAO. The Chief of the Narcotics Section also serves as the OCDETF Coordinator.

AUSAs in the Major Frauds Section handle the most significant white-collar cases in the private sector. The section's priority is corporate fraud that would undermine the trust of the investing community, including falsifications of corporate financial information, self-dealing by corporate insiders, and obstruction of justice, perjury, witness tampering, or other obstructive behavior in connection with investigations of these crimes. The section prosecutes a wide range of business crimes, including securities and investment fraud, telemarketing fraud, savings and loan and bank fraud and embezzlements, and bankruptcy fraud. Major Frauds AUSAs also work closely with investigators from the FBI, IRS, Postal Inspection Service, SEC, FTC, and CFTC. AUSAs in the section serve as coordinators for a number of task forces and working groups, including: the

Securities and Commodities Fraud Working Group, which focuses on the large scale corporate frauds that are an office priority; the Boilerroom Apprehension Task Force (BAT), a task force formed by the United States Attorney to combat the numerous telemarketing fraud operations in the Central District of California; Operation Canadian Eagle/Project Emptor, an FBI group that targets west coast Canadian telemarketers whose victims are in the United States; the Financial Institution Fraud task force; the Bankruptcy Fraud Working Group; and the Insurance Fraud Task Force.

AUSAs in the Public Corruption and Government Fraud (PCGF) Section handle the most significant white-collar cases involving public corruption and fraud against the government. AUSAs in this section work with investigators from virtually of the major federal law enforcement agencies. Their focus includes fraud in government contracts (in particular, Department of Defense contracts), government program fraud, bribery and corruption of government officials, export control violations, tax evasion cases, espionage, and health care fraud. Many of the section's cases involve varying forms of public corruption. Members of the section also staff a variety of working groups and task forces, including the Health Care Fraud, Credit Card Fraud, and Immigration Practitioner Fraud Task Forces.

AUSAs in the Computer Crimes Section prosecute sophisticated attacks on computer systems, online auction frauds and intellectual property offenses as part of the Department of Justice's Computer Hacking and Intellectual Property ("CHIP") program. Section AUSAs receive specialized training in computer technology and legal issues and coordinate with federal and local law enforcement agencies in fighting cybercrime. Section AUSAs participate in several high-technology investigative organizations, including the Los Angeles Electronic Crimes Task Force, and coordinate various working groups designed to address computer intrusions and cyberterrorism, intellectual property offenses and computer forensics issues. In addition, Section AUSAs are actively involved in community outreach efforts with the technology and entertainment industries.

AUSAs in the Environmental Crimes Section handle a wide range of environmental crimes, including: pollution by ocean going cruise vessels; underground fuel storage tank leaks; smuggling and distribution of ozone-depleting substances (CFCs and/or refrigerants) in violation of the federal Clean Air Act; unlawful transportation and disposal of hazardous wastes; destruction and removal of Native American artifacts and native plants on federal lands; and the smuggling of endangered species. AUSAs in the section closely coordinate with federal, state, and local regulatory and law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation and prosecution of environmental crimes, and participate in a number of environmental crimes task forces operating throughout the District, including: the Los Angeles Federal Environmental Task Force; county task forces operating in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties; and a regional environmental task force operating in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties. AUSAs in the section also develop training materials and provide instruction at environmental crimes training courses for prosecutors and investigators.

AUSAs in the Civil Rights Section work closely with the FBI, numerous federal agencies, local law enforcement, and community groups to ensure that civil rights violations are reported and addressed. Priorities for the section include: hate crimes, including those committed by white supremacist groups and those committed using the Internet; civil rights violations, including the use of excessive force, by police officers and other law enforcement employees; and worker exploitation, including instances of involuntary servitude involving undocumented aliens. AUSAs in the section participate in community outreach efforts to encourage the reporting of civil rights violations.

AUSAs in the Asset Forfeiture Section litigate civil and criminal asset forfeiture cases. The bulk of these cases are based on seizures made in narcotics investigations, but forfeitures have also arisen from a variety of violations of federal law, including fraud, customs, and gambling violations.

AUSAs in the Criminal Appeals Section supervise and handle matters before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that involve some of the most challenging legal issues in criminal law, including affirmative government appeals, appeals involving issues of first impression, and efforts to obtain en banc review. In past years, AUSAs in the section have also worked closely with the Solicitor General's Office to secure Supreme Court review of significant legal issues impacting the development of criminal law. The section is staffed by six attorneys, most of whom split their time with a senior trial section. While AUSAs from the other sections write the briefs for and argue many of their own appeals, AUSAs from the Criminal Appeals Section have editorial control over all of the briefs and both write and argue on some of the more significant cases.

All AUSAs, regardless of the section, have the opportunity to handle a variety of cases. A number of AUSAs have developed expertise that has led them to assume primary responsibility in the USAO for specific areas such as labor violations, export control violations, Medicare and Medicaid fraud, prison crimes, child pornography, copyright violations, environmental crimes, and civil rights violations. Some AUSAs have developed nationally-recognized expertise in particular areas.

Civil Division

Chief of the Civil Division: Leon W. Weidman
Authorized number of attorneys: 51

The Civil Division is responsible for representing the federal government and its agencies and employees in civil litigation in the District. A few civil cases are handled by Department of Justice attorneys from Washington DC or from other offices in the field.

AUSAs in the Civil Division are active at both the trial and appellate levels. It is normal practice for the same AUSA to carry a case from investigation through the District Court and on to the Ninth Circuit.

The Civil Division is divided into three sections. The largest section is the General Civil Section. This section offers broad exposure to civil litigation. While each AUSA in the section is assigned a wide variety of cases, many develop expertise in particular areas of law depending upon their interests and the needs of the USAO. Two primary areas of practice are tort cases, including medical malpractice and air crash cases, and Title VII cases alleging discrimination in hiring and employment practices by agencies of the United States. Other areas of practice include immigration, bankruptcy, debts owed the United States or its agencies, breach of contract, judicial review of administrative findings, and injunctive proceedings. Some cases arise in the lands area, including condemnation, ejectment, and quiet title actions. In addition, section AUSAs handle civil penalty and injunctive relief actions to enforce federal environmental laws both as plaintiffs and defendants.

The next largest section is the Affirmative Civil Enforcement Section. This section investigates and litigates civil False Claims Act cases involving fraud on the United States and civil penalty cases involving a broad variety of government programs. False Claims Act cases primarily involve defense contractor and health care fraud.

The third section is the Financial Litigation Section. This section pursues recoveries of moneys owed the United States as the result of both criminal and civil judgments.

The chief contrast between the role of a new AUSA in the Civil Division and that of his or her counterpart in a private law firm is the high degree of individual responsibility. Every new Civil Division AUSA is assigned cases for personal handling as soon as he or she begins practice. Many of these involve large dollar amounts and pose unique questions of fact and law. Taking depositions, preparing and answering interrogatories, negotiating for settlement, trying cases, and writing and arguing appeals allow new Civil Division AUSAs to develop quickly into experienced litigators. Although new AUSAs are given great responsibilities, they also are provided sufficient advice, direction, and supervision to assist them in assuming those responsibilities.

Tax Division

Chief of the Tax Division: Edward M. Robbins
Authorized number of attorneys: 8

The Tax Division handles all civil tax litigation involving the federal government in the Central District of California, other than in the Tax Court. The Tax Division also handles prosecution of certain criminal tax violations.

AUSAs in the Tax Division represent the government in federal and state civil actions and proceedings in which the IRS is involved or where the defendant is an IRS officer or employee sued for official acts. Tax Division AUSAs appear before the United States District Court, the United States Bankruptcy Court, the United States Bankruptcy Appellate Panel, and the state courts. Tax Division AUSAs handle a variety of civil tax cases and matters, including suits for refund of income, employment, excise, estate and gift taxes; suits to collect delinquent tax liabilities and to foreclose federal tax liens (including fraudulent conveyance actions); adversary proceedings and contested matters in bankruptcy (including objections to tax claims, objections to confirmation of Chapter 11 and 13 reorganization plans and complaints to determine dischargeability of debt and for turnover of property); actions to enforce IRS summonses; suits for summary review of jeopardy and termination assessments; suits to recover wrongfully levied property; suits for damages for failure to release levy and wrongful collection activity; suits against IRS employees for constitutional torts; actions affecting property in which the United States claims a tax lien (including actions in interpleader, eminent domain and for partition); and probate proceedings. Tax Division AUSAs also handle a variety of criminal tax prosecutions, including tax evasion and the filing of false tax returns.

Training

All AUSAs receive on-the-job training in the Office. This training differs according to Division and the background of the AUSA, and includes direct supervision and live and taped lecture programs.

Within the first two years of duty, AUSAs normally attend two to three weeks of basic and/or advanced civil or criminal trial advocacy courses at the National Advocacy Center in South Carolina. The NAC regularly offers various other courses in specialized areas.

AUSAs and non-lawyers may also attend pertinent training programs offered locally, a training budget for which is provided by the Department of Justice. Past training programs attended by USAO employees have covered areas such as public corruption, money laundering, asset forfeiture, savings and loan fraud, securities fraud, environmental crimes, bankruptcy fraud, and defense procurement fraud.

Employment: Attorneys

Most attorneys hired have several years of experience, although highly qualified recent graduates with some experience in practice or as a judicial clerk are also considered. California bar membership is an important factor in hiring decisions. Exceptional lawyers who are not members of the California bar are occasionally hired, but must take the next available California bar examination after their entry on duty and must become California bar members as quickly as possible. Attorneys undergo a full background investigation before entering on duty, and are expected to make a four-year commitment to the USAO.

Employment: Law Students

Law students on Summer, College Work-Study, and Clinical Law Programs may be assigned to work as law clerks in any or all of the litigating Divisions. Law clerks assist AUSAs with research, pleadings, trial preparation, appellate briefs, and habeas corpus responses. Law clerks are encouraged to observe trials and other court proceedings in cases on which they have worked or in other cases of general interest in the USAO. Law clerks who satisfy the qualifications for certification to appear in court under AUSA supervision can on occasion handle proceedings in misdemeanor prosecutions. Law clerks must pass a background check before appointment.

Applications

Attorneys seeking appointment as AUSAs, and law students desiring summer or semester law clerk positions, should write to the Chief Assistant United States Attorney and include a resume. Attorneys should indicate preferred Division(s). Attorney applications are accepted throughout the year. Law students should submit summer clerkship applications by no later than September of their second year, and should indicate any special areas of interest. Students seeking other positions should contact the Personnel Office. Positions other than AUSAs and law clerks are normally filled through the Office of Personnel Management in Los Angeles, which can be reached at (213) 894-8632.

Further Information

Attorneys: Chief Assistant U. S. Attorney, George Cardona (213) 894-8323

Non-Attorneys: Personnel Office (213) 894-8632

Office Switchboard (24 hours) (213) 894-2434

Information Regarding Employment Elsewhere in the Department of Justice

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Office of the Deputy Attorney General
Department of Justice
Tenth & Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.
Room 4311
Washington, D. C. 20530 (202) 514-3396
Attn: Linda Cinciotta, Director

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